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JOHN A LASKO AND THE REFORMATION IN POLAND.

1499-1560.

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JAN LASKI¹ was a unique Protestant reformer. He was neither a theologian and preacher like Hus, nor an illiterate peasant like Peter Kheltchiksky, still less an educator like Comenius, but a Polish baron, a Roman Catholic priest and canon, and one of the greatest scholars of his time. After Bohemia and Moravia, it was Poland which among the Slav countries gave the world the most brilliant leader in the army of the reformers. And this is not to be wondered at. Poland, which today is nothing but a geographical name, was in the sixteenth century one of the most powerful kingdoms in Europe, extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and from the Oder on the west to the Dnieper on the east. The kings of Poland residing at Cracow were all suzerains of the dukes of Prussia and Courland.

Three causes prepared the Polish people to receive the fertile seed of an evangelical reformation: (1) The free institutions of the country. The monarchy was elective, controlled by diets in which the feudal lords played an important part. The Polish barons were not less jealous of the independence of the crown as regards the pope, nor less anxious to check the covetousness and immorality of the Roman Catholic clergy, than were the English barons in the time of Wiclif.² (2) The second cause was the spirit of opposition to the Roman ritual kept up in some churches and monasteries, as, for example, at St. Cross, near Cracow. In fact, Poland received the first seed of Christianity and also her liturgy from Greek missionaries, disciples of Cyril and Methodius, who came from Constantinople by way of Bohemia and greater Moravia. The Polish priests fasted according to Greek custom until the middle of the eighth century, and

¹Or Lascki; in English spelled Laski, Lasky, Lasko, Lasco, à Lasco, or Alasko.

²See the articles of Ostrorog voted by the diet of 1459.

resisted for a long time the law of celibacy. This opposition was manifested for the last time in anti-papal books, such as *De Matrimonio Sacerdotali* (Cracow, 1504), *De Vero Cultu Dei*, and *Epistola Bernardi ad Symonem Cracoviensem* (1515). The last of these placed the authority of the gospels before the pope's ordinances, the councils, and other human traditions. (3) But it was, above all, the close political relations with Bohemia and with the university of Prag that did most to prepare Poland for Protestantism. The two crowns were often worn by one head, as at the time of Wenceslaus, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and Ladislas II. and his son Louis (1471-1526). The two nations belonged to the same race, and their languages were so much alike that they could understand each other without interpreters. Queen Hedwig founded at the university of Prag (1386 A. D.) a college bearing her name, to provide a home for the students of Poland. It is, therefore, not surprising that when Hus displayed the flag of revolt against Roman tyranny, the great majority of the Polish students took his part. Later on, at Constance, the Polish barons joined the Bohemian lords in protesting against the violation of the safe conduct of John Hus.

Jerome of Prag, and after him the Doctors Payne and Kostka, had been at Vilna and especially at Cracow defending and spreading their reforming ideas, and had been eagerly received, so that, in the middle of the fourteenth century, the kingdom of Poland was greatly injured by the Hussite persecutions.

A hundred years later Poland gave a sympathetic welcome to a company of a thousand of the Bohemian Brotherhood driven out of Bohemia and Moravia by the unrelenting Ferdinand I. of Austria. These poor exiled Protestants were kindly received by several of the Polish barons, who gave them land from their own estates that they might build schools and churches at Thorn (1549), at Ostrorog, and at Posen. Among the protectors of the Bohemian Brethren were Gorka, castellan of Posen, Boner, castellan of Oswiecin, the Krasinski, Ostrorog, the countess Dhiska, and, above all, Nicolaus IV., Ratzivill, palatin of Vilna and governor of Livonia. John à Lasko was not among them. But it

was at this time that he began to correspond with Calvin, Bullinger, and the Swiss reformers. The reformer of Geneva, on his part, dedicated to king Sigismund Augustus his commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews.

Lasko was born in the year 1499 at the castle Lasko. He descended from a noble family which had given Poland several archbishops and palatines, and had in its coat of arms a ship, whence the surname of Kerabieni. His father, Jeroslav (Jerome) Lasko, who died in 1523, was palatine of Sierad and Lenczyc, and his uncle, John Andrew à Lasko (died 1531) was archbishop of Gnesen, primate of the Roman Catholic church, and chancellor of the kingdom of Poland. He, himself, in a letter to the king of Poland,³ alluded to the English origin of one of his ancestors, a certain Albert Laki, companion of William the Conqueror, who is said to have emigrated to Poland. Robert, the grandson of Albert, was said to have been bishop of Cracow (1143 A. D.)

Lasko was destined by his father for the church, but he lost him at the age of twenty-four, and it was his uncle who granted him his first living and made him dean of the Chapter of Gnesen,⁴ and sent him to the universities of Bologna and Padua. The young Polish canon (he was then twenty-five years old), urged by his intellectual curiosity, went to Zürich, where he met Ulrich Zwingli the day after the order was received for the abolition of the mass and of the celibacy of priests in that city. Far from being repelled, he was attracted by the Swiss reformer. He wrote: "I shall say nothing now about Zwingli, except that he has written many pious and remarkable things, and has led me to read the Holy Scriptures, so that through him chiefly I have derived divine benefit."⁵ He spent the year 1525 at Basle as a boarder or a guest of Erasmus, whose esteem he won and whose library he afterward bought. Erasmus confirmed him in the

³ DALTON, *Lasciana*, Berlin, 1898. Letter No. 87.

⁴ COUNT VALERIAN KRASINSKI, *Sketch of the Reformation in Poland*, London, 1838 and 1840; 2 vols.; Vol. I, p. 248.

⁵ Answer to Westphal, Basle, 1560; KUYPER, *Johannis a Lasco Opera, tam edita quam inedita, recensuit vitam auctoris enarravit*, Amsterdam, 1866; 2 vols.; Vol. I, p. 282.

idea that a reform of the Roman Catholic church was necessary. It was to be brought about by the improvement of the habits and by the better education of the clergy, but without destroying the unity of the church represented by the pope. Lasko took part in the controversy between Erasmus and Luther on the subject of free will, and, in a letter to his friend Amersbach, was not afraid to call Luther "the would-be evangelist who tyrannizes over you and will not let you speak."

Returned to Poland, the young priest was soon suspected by the ultramontanist party, because of his intercourse with Erasmus and Zwingli. They accused him of heresy and a still graver crime, that of having married secretly; and it was probably to clear himself of this accusation that he presented a declaration (*iuramentum*) to the archbishop of Gnesen and the bishop of Cracow, in which he says that, although he had read a great many schismatic books, he approved of none of the doctrines contrary to those held by the Roman Catholic church (1526).⁶ He had spent about twelve years away from his country, unnoticed, devoting himself to classics and theological studies, corresponding with his faithful Amersbach, and urging his uncle and a few other bishops to a pacific reformation of the church. He now enjoyed intimate relations with John Boner, castellan of Osviecin, with André Modrevsky, and with the Gorkas, who ten years later were the foremost champions of the Reformation. But the obstacles he met in the indifference of some, and the fanaticism and intolerance of others, gradually destroyed his ideal of the Reformation. By a slow evolution his mind was turned toward more radical conceptions. A painful occurrence undoubtedly hastened the crisis of his life. A young Frenchman, very dear to him, and whom he had sent to study at Wittenberg, recommending him warmly to Melanchthon,⁷ died

⁶See also LEZIUS, *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 1899, No. 2; on the other hand compare PROFESSOR G. KAWERAU's article, "Der 'Reinigungseid' des Johannes Laski," in *Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift*, May, 1899, pp. 430-41, in which the well-known Göttingen church historian maintains that this declaration was made in 1648, and adduces some very strong proofs for his position, against DALTON, *Lasciana* (1898), and GEORGE PASCAL, *Jean de Lasco* (Paris, 1894).

⁷ Cf. Melanchthon's letter to Lasko, February 2, 1535.

while the latter was at Leipzig, and the authorities refused to bury him in holy ground on the pretext that he had asked for communion with bread and wine. Really, it was because they suspected him of Lutheran heresy. This intolerance repelled Lasko (1535). Soon after, in a letter of congratulation to André Krzycki, recently made archbishop, Lasko called his attention to the people of Poland, disgusted with "the old women's fables which they were asked to believe and longing for the knowledge of God's word," and expressed his fear that the years would be too few for him to gather this great harvest already ripening.⁸ But the prelate answered the suggestion with scornful irony.

On June 28, 1536, Lasko was still at the ancestral castle of Lasko; six months after he was at Basle (November 12), and in the beginning of 1537 at Leipzig, where he met Melanchthon.⁹ Then we lose sight of him, to find him only in 1538 at Cracow. What was he doing during that year? M. George Pascal says he went to Louvain, making there the acquaintance of Albert Hardenberg, a monk of the convent of Aduwert, Friesland, and from whose family he afterward chose his wife. Dalton thinks he retired to one of his family estates to give himself up entirely to his beloved studies. This last supposition seems to me confirmed by a letter from Hosius,¹⁰ highly praising him: "No one more holy than he could be imagined. He is virtue and righteousness themselves. No one in our country is equal to him in genius and knowledge. Learning and uprightness are so well commingled in him that one cannot tell which outweighs the other. And this man, who could face the greatest men in the kingdom, withdrew from the court and went to shut himself up in one of his fortresses, not allowing himself to speak to his servants, in order to be able, with his mind thus free from all care, to enjoy literature, for which, from his tender youth, he had the greatest predilection." This testimony has the greater

⁸ *Lasciana*, Letter No. 74.

⁹ *Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. III, 359.

¹⁰ Letter to Lazarus Bonamico in the *Stanislai Hosii Epistolæ*, ed. F. HIPLER et VINC. ZAKRZEWSKI (Cracoviæ, 1879).

value because Hosius was to be one of the most violent adversaries of the Reformation.

In January, 1538, Lasko was offered the bishopric of Cujavia, one of the highest posts in the church; he refused, gave up all his other livings, and soon after, with permission of King Sigismund, left Poland. The reason is easy to see. He had found it impossible to reform the Roman church, being still a member of it. Unable longer to endure the conscience-stifling air of Poland, he sought a place in Europe where he could breathe freely and make his belief known. This is the way in which he expresses his motives in a letter written from Leipzig, September 28, 1541, to Lucas of Gorka, who had accepted the bishopric of Cujavia,¹¹ and was also a partisan of the Reformation: "We have heard that one name only exists on earth through which we can all be saved; it is the name Jesus Christ; he alone is the way, the door, and the doorkeeper; if he closes it, no one can cause it to be reopened; if he opens it, no one has the right to close it. To him we must go if we wish to have part in his kingdom. Oh! that all might see the example of unutterable goodness and mercy given by God to me his sheep, already lost and almost dead when he called me from the darkness of ignorance to the light of his understanding, and from the captivity of Babylon into the enjoyment of the happy freedom of his holy word! It has been, I own, hard to leave my beloved country, very dear friends, and, above all, my property; hard to expose myself to the dangers of poverty and to bear the cross. But thanks be to God who gave me courage to act thus, and who did not suffer that his grace should be sluggish in me. Far from repenting what I have done, I cannot return enough thanks to the Almighty, not only for that, but because I can still glory in having been the first among us [Polish people] in whom God chose to reveal his ineffable mercy. He considered me worthy of being despised, jeered at, outraged, and robbed of all my goods, for his holy name, he who, while on earth, was despised, scoffed at, condemned, and even nailed to a cross, but who now reigns invisible and glorious, at the right hand of his Father."

¹¹ *Lasciana*, No. 83.

And our hero signed himself thus: "John à Lasco, formerly possessing numerous titles, but now the despoiled servant of Jesus Christ, the crucified and despoiled."¹² What an admirable expression of his faith and courage are these simple lines! How plainly one sees also the chivalrous spirit of his nation, and the tenacity of his Anglo-Saxon ancestors!

Let us consider now the use Lasko made of his religious liberty bought at so dear a price. His whole life, henceforth, was to be consecrated to the propagation of the Reformation and to the confederation of the Protestants, scattered and divided in Europe. The remainder of his life falls into three periods: (*a*) in Friesland, for nine years, 1540-49; (*b*) in the churches of the refugees in London and Frankfurt (1549-55); (*c*) then in his own country (1550-60).

But it may be asked, What doctrine did he preach? Was he a Lutheran, or a Calvinist? Neither. He remained independent, and created a confession of faith and a form of ecclesiastical government for himself. His doctrine was formed under the influence of Erasmus and Zwingli, in a manner quite independent of Calvin and Luther. I find the most sincere expression of it in the abridgment of the Doctrine of the Churches in East Friesland, composed in 1544, but not published in his lifetime. The essence of his doctrine is in his statement concerning the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Only as we have this knowledge can we obtain everlasting life. We should know nothing true about God and his attributes if Christ, the only mediator between God and man, had not revealed it to us. To him, too, must we go to know ourselves, for, in order to appreciate fully our weakness, we must compare ourselves with the divine image appearing in Christ. Our actual sins come from original sin, which, like a disease, has tainted our will. God forgives them, not for our merits, but for the merits of Christ, true man and true God. Faith justifies us, but it is worthy of the name and truly efficacious only if it produces good works.

As for the sacraments, Lasko admitted only two: he approved of the christening of children, but did not consider the matter

¹² "Multis olim titulis insignis; nunc autem nudus nudi Jesu-Christi crucifixi servus."

important enough to exclude Anabaptists from the church. The eucharist, according to him, is the commemoration of the death of the Lord, and it testifies the full communication of his merits and virtues to our souls. Therefore the essential mystery of this sacrament is that "all who eat consecrated bread and drink consecrated wine participate in an identical, certain, and indubitable way in the Savior's body and blood."

We shall now look at his work in Friesland. Lasko left Löwen for Emden, Friesland, in search of rest. He wished to enjoy family life in peace. He was probably attracted also by the abbey of Aduwert (near Groningen), for it was near the residence of the monk and theologian Albert Hardenberg, whom he had met at Louvain and with whom he had formed a friendship. At an early period the priests of the churches of Emden, Aurich, Leer, Verden, and Oldersum had resolved to reform the church, and, protected by Count Edzard against their suzerain, the sovereign of the Netherlands, Charles V., they had also published a confession of faith (1528). Lasko accepted from Countess Anna the post of superintendent of the churches in that country (1542). But he himself said¹³ that he took it on the condition that he should be permitted to give it up if the king of Poland called him back, or if he saw that his ministry was not for the service of God. The churches, being swayed by Franciscans on one side and Anabaptists on the other, were in a sort of anarchy. The first thing Lasko did was to establish in each church a consistory composed of a clergyman and four laymen of the congregation. The duty of this council was to control the habits of the citizens, to bring them back to their duty, and even to excommunicate them if they despised its warnings. The only tie between the churches was the superintendent, who visited them, and gathered round him their clergy. In fact, the ministers in Friesland were to meet every week in summer, at Emden, to decide questions of doctrine, to judge appeals on points of discipline, and to see to the recruiting of the clergy. He called this council a *cætus*; it corresponded to what they call a *classe* in the

¹³Letter to Bullinger, August, 1544; see also *Brevis et dilucida de Sacramentis Ecclesie Christi Tractatio*, London, 1552.

national churches of Neufchâtel. Through this organization Lasko preserved the new reform from two sorts of adversaries: the Roman Catholic monks and some sectarians, such as the disciples of David Joris, who would have led it into the dangers of mysticism.

In 1548 the emperor Charles V. imposed on all the states of the empire the Interim of Augsburg (May 15), a sort of provisional reform, which retained several grave errors of the Roman church, and as Lasko refused to accept it, he had to resign his functions of superintendent of the churches in Friesland. However, he only asked for leave of absence, hoping to come back when the storm was over; and, in fact, he came back in December, 1548, and remained with his beloved churches until the month of October in the following year, composing for them at this time a catechism. Then he was obliged by ill-health to leave the country for good.

While the Protestants were being persecuted on the continent because of the Interim of Charles V., Lasko found a shelter for himself and part of his flock in England, in the reign of Edward VI. England was then a country hospitable to all who were exiled for conscience sake. In London and in Southwark there were about three thousand Protestant refugees, partly from France and partly from Holland, without counting some hundreds of Italians and Spaniards. Our Polish pastor was welcomed by Cranmer and Latimer, who at that time were reforming the Catholic churches in England and were trying to gather round them the ablest of the continental reformers. Besides, he had no trouble in persuading Cecil,¹⁴ the secretary of state, and the duke of Somerset, one of the regents, of the advantage the country would gain by welcoming these Flemish and Dutch workmen who were so skilful in weaving wool and hemp. Thus Lasko obtained a charter from Edward VI., which was very liberal for the time, authorizing him to found a foreign church in London (1550) having its own liturgy and government.¹⁵

The first superintendent of this congregation was Lasko himself, who had under him three branches, French, Dutch, and

¹⁴ KUYPER, Vol. II, pp. 45-50.

¹⁵ *Forma ac Ratio tota ecclesiastici ministerii*, London, 1555; Frankfurt, 1550; in KUYPER, Vol. II, pp. 45-50.

Italian. True bishop, he composed for these churches a confession of faith and a catechism very much like those composed for the churches in East Friesland. But it is in the constitution of this London church that Lasko showed himself really original. Each branch of the church had the right to appoint the members of the consistory, the election being submitted to royal sanction; the consistory was composed of one or several clergymen or prophets, of elders or seniors, and of curators or *viri politici*.

The last named of these officers had charge of the interests of the church in her intercourse with the established church of England and with the government. Another institution created by Lasko was that of Bible meetings held twice a week, where the laymen had the right to discuss with the clergy the sermons of the week.

He was preparing also a code of discipline and a liturgy, when a new tempest swept over his work. Edward VI. died, and Mary Tudor, who succeeded him, put herself at the head of the movement for the restoration of Catholicism in England, and banished Lasko and his colleagues. After having in vain sought refuge in Denmark, whence he was repelled by the intolerance of the heads of the Lutheran church, and after having taken leave of his churches in Friesland, he went for his health to Frankfurt. There was a church of French and English refugees, as in London. One can see, from the letters he wrote to Calvin, the interest he took in this church and in the discussions that were raised either between the Calvinists and the Lutherans, or the Episcopalians and Presbyterians, which were to give birth to English Puritanism.¹⁶

In 1555 our exile received good news from Poland. The reformers in Little Poland had joined the Bohemian Brethren. The synod of Kosmineck and the diet of Petrikov had adopted resolutions in favor of summoning a national council for the reformation of the Roman Catholic church. The Holy Scriptures were to be taken as the sole rule of doctrine. He expressed his joy to his friend Hardenberg, for never, even in

¹⁶ Zürich Letters, 3d series.

the countries where he had been welcomed most warmly, had the love of his native land left his heart. He wrote letter after letter to the king of Poland, to the senators, and to members of other classes of the nation, exhorting them to pursue the task of reformation. At the same time he added example to precept. He sent to Sigismund Augustus his "Constitution of the foreign church in London," with a long dedication. Three months afterward he wrote three letters on the "just and legitimate manner of organizing churches" (Frankfurt, December 31, 1555). Thus, as a prudent man, he was preparing the way for his return. His last letter from Frankfurt was written on September 8. Somewhat later he started and went slowly through Hesse-Cassel, Erfurt, Wittenberg, and Breslau, arriving in December at Bolioz (Poland), and put up with a nephew of John Boner, castellan of Biecz.

Lasko was thus returning to his own country after a voluntary exile of twenty years. Although only fifty-seven years old, his health was ruined by the Friesian fevers and his frequent peregrinations, and he could say, like Paul the apostle, that he carried on his body the marks of Jesus Christ, for it was through his fidelity to the cause of truth and liberty of conscience that he had suffered so much. But if the body was exhausted, the heart was still courageous, happy at the dawn of the gospel light in Poland, and burning with zeal to consecrate to God the treasures of wisdom accumulated by long experience and what remained to him of his life.

Lasko was received with open arms by the Protestants in Little Poland, where he had many friends; they took him at once for their real leader, although the title of superintendent belonged to Felix Cruciger. On the first day of January, 1557, he had a conference with the latter in company with Lismannin and George Israel, Bohemian priests from Kozmineck, and a dozen Reformed ministers. After having rendered thanks and having received congratulations on his return, he discussed with them the two questions that troubled the reformers most: first, the union made at Kozmineck with the Bohemian Brethren; and, secondly, the tenure of ministerial service in the parishes. Before

the arrival of Lasko the churches in Little Poland had tried to organize themselves as much as possible on Calvin's principles as stated in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. But soon, feeling isolated, they had gone back to the unity of the Bohemian Brethren, whose administrative center was in Greater Poland, and had accepted a discipline and government which were really in the hands of the priests. That did not satisfy them; there was in Little Poland a lay element, represented by the lords and officers of the crown, which was to play its part in the government of the church. On the other hand, the Italian Anti-Trinitarians had found favorable ground there, and it required a stronger theologian than any of the priests of Bohemia to confute their arguments and maintain the doctrine of the Polish reformers in harmony with that of the Protestants in Switzerland, France, and Germany.

John Lasko was the right man in the right place; he was born in the country; he was a nobleman, and a good theologian; not equal to Calvin and Melanchthon, but on a footing with them. At his first interview with the Bohemian priest Israel he expounded his program: "It is a great task to reform the church and bring it to an apostolical state. For that the most necessary thing is concord and unity of the ministers, so that they shall all be of one and the same mind. I like the Bohemian confession of faith, but it needs rectifying, for example in the article concerning the sacraments." Thus he was for union with the Bohemian Brethren, and even, if possible, with the Lutherans, but without sacrificing his own doctrine. In the matter of organization he was in favor of the irremovability of ministers, for, he said, "Christ's reign is eternal and immutable, so in all but exceptional circumstances, as, for example, immorality on the part of a clergyman, or some urgent necessity of a church, the ministers of the Eternal King must have a continuous office." Moreover, he was too cautious to wish to impose on the Polish churches the constitution he had made for the churches in Friesland and for the church of refugees in London. Without doubt he maintained the same principles, but adapted them to the particular circumstances of his country. He tried to unite the

episcopal system, having observed its advantages in England, with the presbyterian and the synodal forms which suited so well the parliamentary needs of Poland. He increased the authority of the superintendent by giving him charge of visiting and inspecting the churches, and he introduced the office of *virii politici*. One cannot but admire that great impulse he gave the ecclesiastical life of these Reformed churches.

Not less than fifteen synods were held during the three years he spent in Little Poland. He was present at most of them, and secured the passage of resolutions on four important questions: (1) the drawing up of a confession of faith and a liturgy for the Reformed churches of Poland; (2) a project of union with the Bohemian Brethren and the Lutherans, which was passed at the synod of 1570; (3) the subscription to a loan of 2,000 florins for the publication of a Polish Bible; (4) the foundation of a Protestant college to counterbalance the influence of the Jesuits over the youth. In the reports of these synods (1557-60)¹⁷ one feels the spirit of wisdom, justice, and understanding of a great minister of Christ, of a true reformer.

But, alas, the days of the man who had been the soul of this beautiful awakening were numbered. Old before his time, exhausted by many troubles, he died on January 8, 1560. His colleagues and the foremost of the noblemen in Little Poland gave him a funeral worthy of him, without pomp, but marked by eloquent manifestations of public grief. The words written at the beginning of the report of the synod held January 29, 1560, are the most beautiful tribute paid to his memory: "The venerated and celebrated John à Lasko, a man of God and the honor of our country, having through God's revelation broken off with the impious papacy and its idolatrous worship, had traveled in many countries in order to find liberty, to glorify God the Father in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Ghost. But as soon as he heard that the light of the gospel was rising on his country, although already old, not so much through the number of his years as through toil in the service of the church of God,

¹⁷ DALTON, *Lasciana, nebst den ältesten evangelischen Synodalprotokollen Polens, 1551-1561*. Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1898.

he left England and came back to Poland, in order with all his might to promote the glory of God, and this he bravely did before God and the nobles. Three years after his return he was gently transferred by God's grace from death to life."

He has been called the "father" or "apostle of Poland." This praise is not excessive. John Lasko is one of the most beautiful characters among the reformers. One who, at thirty-nine, gives up all his titles and income and leaves his country to obey his conscience, is a rare man in any century, even in the sixteenth. But the title of nobility which he acquired by his efforts to constitute truly Reformed churches, and to secure the organic union of the various branches of Protestantism, are worth all those he had won before. His grandeur does not consist in his intellectual breadth, or in his high culture as a humanist. Like Erasmus, his first master, he was a citizen of Europe, yet in chivalry of character and in affection he remained Polish to the last. Had he lived a few years longer, he would have been what Luther was to Germany, Calvin to France, and Zwingli to Switzerland—the reformer of Poland.